

MUSIC REVIEW: Cocker Back in the Ring

Hilburn, Robert

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MUSIC REVIEW

Cocker Back in the Ring

BY ROBERT HILBURN

Times Pop Music Critic

Joe Cocker's return to the Inglewood Forum Sunday night for his first local concert in two years had a lot of the feel of a onetime champion's return to the ring.

If you'll go along with that analogy for a moment, Cocker struggled quite a bit Sunday—troubled chiefly, it seemed, by a less-than-electric stage manner—but rallied in the closing minutes to earn a split-decision victory. Not all that he wanted, perhaps, but more than it looked, for the early going, that he was going to get.

When Cocker finished his much-heralded Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour in May of 1970, he was —on most scorecards—the most exciting singer in rock music, exciting both vocally and in his stage mannerisms.

But he returned to England and virtual retire-

ment, a move caused—several of his close friends agree—by a disenchantment with the rock 'n' roll business. In his absence, Rod Stewart took his place as rock's greatest stylist.

Cocker's return to concerts began on a rather disastrous note in February at New York's Madison Square Garden. Well before Cocker left the stage, a sizable portion of the audience had left the Garden. Not only was Cocker using virtually all new material (the audience wanted to hear the old Cocker hits), but his voice was still rusty from the layoff.

Things, however, picked up as the tour worked its way across country, various sources agree. Not only did Cocker restore a few of the old songs to the program, but his voice gained strength.

All of which brings us to the Forum, which was sold out for his return. When Cocker's band

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JOE COCKER — A victory by split decision.
Times photo by Kathleen Ballard

Joe Cocker Back in the Rock Ring

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walked on stage Sunday, there was the same almost measurable tension in the arena — energy and emotion waiting to be released—that you find when an audience is really keyed up for a rock show.

Opening with "Black-Eyed Blues," Cocker's voice seemed from the beginning to be in good shape. But equally clear from the beginning was a weakness in Cocker's stage manner which kept him from generating the excitement that marked his earlier appearances here.

Though he has picked up a new nervous mannerism (constantly pulling at his hair with his right hand, as if to smooth it out), he no longer seemed to put his body into the music the way he did when he was electrifying his audiences.

Cocker, for most of the show Sunday, was simply passive, where he was once so aggressive; away from the center of your attention instead of dominating it.

More than their voices, part of the strength of rock singers (from Presley to Jagger, Cocker to Stewart) is the matter of stage presence/style and it was in this area—once his forte—that Cocker had trouble Sunday.

Something in the Way He Moves

His voice was strong enough to get the audience behind him on the familiar tunes, but his manner was too retiring (giving him the appearance almost of a man under sedation) to give the new songs the spark needed to bring out the maximum audience response.

Even on "High Time We Went," one of his best boogie tunes, there wasn't the reaction in the audience to convince you he had won back his crown. But there was such a genuine flurry of excitement in the Forum (almost everyone was on his feet) during the final minutes (as Cocker sang "Feelin' Alright," "Cry Me a River" and "Hitchcock Railway") to bring the singer the split decision and to tell you he still has the power to recapture that title.

There's no way you can count a good man out, and Cocker is still a fine rock singer. Perhaps the strain of a major tour after being away from performing so long is troubling him. The next tour probably will be the real test of his standing among current rock singers.

He showed Sunday he still has the voice. The remaining question is what he really wants. He must have been quite upset emotionally over the business of rock stardom to have sat out two years, and this tour may tell him whether he really wants to get back into it.

With Cocker Sunday was Stevie Wonder, whose 55-minute appearance also drew a rousing response from the Forum audience. While I would have preferred hearing some of his early hits to the strict diet of "get it on" rock-soul numbers he played, Wonder is too gifted an artist to restrict or limit himself to one style.

As shown in his new "Music on My Mind" album, Wonder obviously wants to move away from the days of "My Cherie Amour" and "Yester-me, Yester-you, Yesterday" to a more contemporary rock style. And growth by an artist deserves applause.

But his work (both on the album and at the Forum) seems far more transitional than finished at this point, with the music outdistancing the lyrics in most cases. There are some high points on the album (such as "Happier Than the Morning Sun," which he didn't do Sunday) that combine his early style with what he is reaching for now quite well.

This was the first of what I understand will be a series of rock appearances by Wonder. On the basis of his excellence in the past, the new role is worth careful attention. As with Cocker, we should have a far better idea of this stage of his career after it has had a little more chance to develop.

An Old Friend at Pauley

JOAN BAEZ/PAULEY PAVILION: Going to see Joan Baez is a little like going to see an old friend. You know she's going to sing pretty much the same things she sang last time, but still you know you're going to enjoy it. So it was Saturday night at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion.

Even if she does throw in some new songs (such as Billy Joe Shaver's "Good Christian Soldier"), they are so true to her style that they instantly sound familiar.

The significant thing about Saturday's concert was evidence of her continued growth as a writer. Though she wrote several of the songs on her recent "Blessed Are . . ." album, the new songs show an even greater sureness, incorporating both the free-flowing narrative and simple, straight-ahead melodies that characterize the best folk tunes.

The new songs include a plea to Bob Dylan to return to his role as a social commentator ("Perhaps the pictures in the Times/Could no longer be put in rhymes"), a trilogy about prisoners and an excellent song about brief, but important relationships. These songs helped make her visit with the full house Saturday even more enjoyable than usual. She accompanied herself on acoustic guitar.